

Australian state government appoints non-elected cabinet members

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In a little-reported development, the South Australian state Labor government of Premier Mike Rann has appointed two non-elected individuals—a business tycoon and a Roman Catholic priest—to its cabinet executive committee. Mining magnate Robert Champion de Crespigny and Monsignor David Cappelletti, South Australia's second highest-ranking Catholic, have become members of Rann's "kitchen cabinet", alongside two other senior ministers.

The move is, first of all, a revealing measure of the disintegration of the Labor Party and its popular support. With the collapse of Labor's credibility and traditional working class loyalties, Rann is trying to consolidate the party's base in corporate boardrooms and churches.

South Australia is an acute example of the instability and decay of parliamentary democracy produced by popular disaffection with the bipartisan pro-business agenda pursued over the past two decades by Labor and Liberal governments alike.

Since 1997, successive state governments, alternatively Labor and Liberal, have clung to office as minority administrations, depending upon so-called independents and defectors from other parties. Until March, Rann governed with the assistance of a now disgraced Speaker of the House of Assembly, Peter Lewis, who previously defected from the Liberals.

Rann's latest bid for political survival involves an unprecedented departure from the British-style "Westminster" system of parliamentary democracy. Since Federation in 1901, no Australian government, state or federal, has breached the principle that members of cabinet must hold seats in parliament.

Traditionally, this rule has been regarded as upholding the supremacy of parliament. It is enshrined in both the Australian and South Australian

constitutions, which require that cabinet ministers must either be members of parliament, or become MPs within three months.

Section 66 of the South Australian Constitution Act 1934 stipulates that "no person shall hold office as a Minister of the Crown for more than three calendar months unless the person is a member of Parliament". In an attempt to evade this constitutional requirement, de Crespigny and Cappelletti were not formally sworn in as ministers.

Nevertheless, the business chief and the priest enjoy direct access to confidential government information and wield more power than ordinary cabinet ministers, who are excluded from Rann's inner sanctum. The official cabinet now acts as little more than a rubberstamp for the decisions of the executive committee.

For several years, De Crespigny, as chairman of Labor's Economic Development Board, and Cappelletti, as chair of its Social Inclusion Board, already occupied unparalleled positions of influence within the government. But to elevate them to an inner cabinet committee is a qualitative step toward non-elected rule.

Former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke first floated such a system in his Boyer lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1979. As Australian Council of Trade Unions president, he suggested that an Australian prime minister should be able to appoint a quarter of his ministry from outside parliament.

Hawke argued that the United States president did not have to choose a cabinet from elected members of Congress. Such comparisons are completely misleading. They gloss over the different concept of separation of powers in the two countries. In the US, the president is the head of state and is directly elected

by the population (albeit via an electoral college). His or her nominees for cabinet and other senior administration posts must not sit in Congress. Yet, they must be confirmed by Congress, which can block their appointments.

Under the “Westminster” system, the premier or prime minister has no independent popular mandate. Instead, they must be members of parliament and command a majority in their lower houses.

Monsignor Cappo’s appointment hands the Catholic church a direct role in government. It violates the separation of church and state, which dates back to the English revolution of the 1640s. The overthrow of the feudal-based and Catholic-backed absolutist monarchy was bound up with the establishment of parliamentary rule as a tenet of bourgeois democracy.

This proposition is also enshrined constitutionally, with section 116 of the Australian Constitution forbidding the official establishment of any religion, imposition of religious observance or requirement of a religious test for any public office.

As vicar general of the Archdiocese of Adelaide, Cappo will be obliged to push for the Vatican’s reactionary policies, including the outlawing of abortion, bans on stem cell research, prohibitions on divorce and homosexuality, and draconian censorship. Since the 1970s he has been involved in administering dwindling state and federal welfare programs, many of which have been handed over to religious organisations.

Cappo was anointed chairman of the government’s Social Inclusion Board in 2002, the same year in which Pope John Paul II gave him the title of Monsignor. That year, Cappo also authored a church protocol for dealing with sexual abuse allegations against clergymen, and helped defend Archbishop George Pell, a close supporter of the pope, from allegations.

De Crespigny’s installation is no less significant. He is executive chairman of Normandy Mining, one of the largest mining companies in Australia, a member of the executive committee of the peak industry group, the Minerals Council of Australia, and a member of the Business Council of Australia, which represents major corporate interests.

De Crespigny’s Economic Development Board has helped draft and promote Rann’s Strategic Plan, which seeks to attract business investment, boost exports and

“reform” the public sector. This means slashing corporate taxes, providing business incentives, driving down real wages and working conditions and gutting public sector jobs and services.

The business chief’s appointment cements Labor’s integration into the corporate world and signals its readiness to break new ground in delivering the required agenda. Rann’s full ministry resembles a business-backed coalition. It includes two openly right-wing politicians, Small Business Minister and National Party member Karlene Maywald, whose federal party is part of the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government, and Independent MP Rory McEwen.

Significantly, Rann’s announcement attracted virtually no comment, let alone criticism, in political, media and academic circles—yet another indication of the extent to which democratic norms are being repudiated by all sections of the official establishment. The state opposition Liberals “reserved judgment” on the step, asking Rann to indicate whether his appointees would be bound by his ministerial code of conduct and the rules of cabinet solidarity. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial welcomed the initiative and suggested that other Australian states could follow suit. Interviewed by *Catholic News*, Hayden Manning, a senior lecturer in politics at South Australia’s Flinders University, hailed the “experiment” as an “innovation in government”.



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